FROM
STRESSED
TO
CENTERED

7 Concrete Steps to Fighting Stress & Anxiety
During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Hey friend,

I don't have to tell you that these are unprecedented times. Collectively, we're experiencing something that no one living has ever experienced, and it comes with a thousand different challenges. But one of the challenges I'm hearing about most right now (and experiencing myself!) is a constant, exhausting hum of stress and anxiety.

I hope this guide normalizes what you're experiencing and helps you see that your mind is doing the BEST it can to look out for you. Sometimes we just need to give our brains a little extra support. Let's dive in!

xo,

Erica Layne

Understanding Stress and Anxiety

At the root of stress and anxiety is a neurological system that has kept our species alive and thriving for thousands of years.

Imagine that your brain is divided into two segments: the lower, primitive, emotional brain and the higher, more developed, cognitive brain.

Within the primitive brain is an area called the amygdala, which alerts us of danger. The amygdala then tells our adrenal glands to send a shot of adrenaline that will enable us to fight or flee.

This is a healthy, protective system! The problem is that most of what we face now are not the life-threatening dangers our primal ancestors faced. We don't often need to flee from animal predators (I sure hope not!), and being isolated from the pack isn't going to mean the extinction of our species.

But our primitive brains have not evolved to know the difference, so it's up to us to use our higher brain to assure our lower brain that *we've got this!*

The following 7 steps will help you do just that!

** This document is meant to address the stress and anxiety that are a normal part of daily life—especially now, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Please talk to a mental health professional if you have further questions about your own mental health.

Step 1

Name, accept, and *own* what you're experiencing

What if you decided to believe that your mind and body are working for you, not against you?

What if you decided to believe that ALL of your feelings—including stress and anxiety—are like the weather, coming and going but never lasting forever?

What if you decided to believe that you're not crippled by your stress and anxiety but your *resistance* to it?

Our struggles are infinitely heavier when we believe that there's something inherently wrong. (And there is nothing wrong with you!) Naming, accepting, and owning your experience is the first step to finding more peace in your day-to-day life.

Step 2

Look for the thought at the root of your stress

One of the most life-changing things I've learned in the last decade is that everything we *feel* starts with a *thought*.

Better yet, once we find the thought that's causing the feeling, we can shift it or drop it altogether—and ultimately, shift how we *feel*.

This, my friend, is strength.

If you're experiencing stress, fear, or anxiety, sit down and look for the thoughts at the root of your pain. Right now, with COVID-19 heavy on our minds, your triggering thoughts may look like any of these (or something else altogether):

- "What if I catch the virus?"
- "What if I lose my job?"
- "I can't keep my family safe right now."
- "Isolation is never. going. to. end."
- "I'm going crazy from spending this much time with my family. I need space!"
- "We're broke."
- "I miss my old life."

Not only does this exercise help you get to the root of your pain, it fights anxiety in another powerful way: It deprives your brain of the ambiguity that anxiety thrives on. Anxiety thrives on a vague, general sense of stress and overwhelm. So when we go to the effort to make it specific—to find the thoughts that are at the root—it immediately begins to dissipate. (Which feels GREAT, by the way!)

Take a moment now to brainstorm and identify the thoughts that are currently causing your stress and anxiety.

Step 3

Thank your brain for working so hard to keep you safe—and then redirect it

Small Shifts to More Positive Thoughts

While simply *identifying* your negative thoughts can bring relief, you'll find even more relief if you learn to consciously shift them to more positive alternatives. Here's how:

Once you've identified a negative thought, don't try to switch to a thought that's 180 degrees from the original; your brain won't believe it. For example, it's a big leap to go from—

"I'm going to lose my job."

⬇

to

⬇

"My job is totally secure!"

Instead, find a more positive thought you can actually get behind, like, "I have a job **today**. I'm taking this one step at a time, and that is enough."

The more you practice replacing the old thought with the new one, the more natural it will begin to feel. With repetition and time, the new, more positive thought can replace the old one and become your default thought—allowing you to release so much of the stress you've been carrying.

A Simple Redirect

A second approach to dealing with the negative thoughts you've identified is to simply redirect your mind. Your brain is working SO HARD to help you avoid danger and isolation! So try thanking it for keeping you safe and then directing your mind to a different topic altogether.

- "Thank you for working so hard to keep me safe, Brain! I've got it from here."

- "Thank you for working so hard to keep me safe, Brain! I'm going to think about something else right now."

This doesn't mean you're refusing to acknowledge or feel your anxiety. (We did that in Step 1!) You're just choosing in this moment not to ruminate—not to dwell on your negative thoughts and let them keep spinning unchecked.

Note: If you're having a hard time sustaining a different line of thought in your head, try doing something that takes ALL of your attention. Play a fun game with your kids, focus on a crossword puzzle or other engaging hobby, watch a great show, or dive into an amazing book.

Exercise

Look back at the stress-inducing thoughts you identified in Step 2. Write a new, positive-but-still-believable thought for each of the negative ones.

Step 4

Know yourself: When faced with pressure, do you become an over-functioner or an under-functioner?

When overwhelmed by stress and anxiety, over-functioners find control in making a plan, taking on responsibility, attacking the to-do list, and giving advice. "For over-functioners," says Brené Brown, "it's easier to do than to feel."

Under-functioners, on the other hand, tend to retreat—hoping that someone *else* will take on the responsibility—and tune out the world.

When an under-functioner and over-functioner are paired during a crisis (for instance, a married couple during a global pandemic!), the dynamics reinforce each other and resentment can build. For both, it may feel anxiety-inducing to move toward the middle—for the over-functioner to let go of some things and the under-functioner to pick some things up. But doing so allows both to better process their feelings (and relieve tension on the relationship in the process).

More on this in Harriet Lerner's book, The Dance of Anger

Step 5

Limit your news and social media consumption

When we feel scared and uncertain about world events and how they might affect us at home, the pull to scroll through the headlines or turn on the news is *strong*. We think that being informed gives us control—and to a degree, it does. Information can keep us safe.

But *too much* information overloads our senses, inflates the problems in our mind, and triggers worry, stress, and anxiety.

The relief you get from checking the news or scrolling Facebook will be temporary—and done in excess, it'll exacerbate your negative feelings.

So to strike that tricky balance between informed and over-informed, try any of these:

- Turn off notifications or delete (whether temporarily or permanently) the news apps that suck you in

- Delete social media apps that are feeding your anxiety

- Limit yourself to checking one news site—or watching one segment of news—at a certain time of day

- Unfollow accounts that are feeding your stress

- Choose *one* account or source to follow—someone whose opinion you trust but who doesn't promote drama

Note: I decided to get my COVID-19 information from reporter Jessica Yellin, who coined the phrase "news not noise." She typically gives a nightly update video on her Instagram profile, which allows me to feel current but not overwhelmed! (I've turned off her Instagram stories, though, to further limit how much COVID content gets in front of my eyes.)

Step 5

Move your body

When I first started meeting with my current psychiatrist, one of the first things he talked about (beyond our discussion of medication) was the power of movement. He said when our early ancestors were being preyed on by a lion, they knew to MOVE—and move *fast.*

Our bodies still have that same response to fear, even if our fear is usually lower-grade than the caveman/tiger example. ;) Moving helps us release the anxiety stored in the body.

On top of that, the amygdala (the part of the primitive brain that alerts you to danger) is a mono-tasker; it struggles to do more than one thing at once. So if you move your body, you can essentially shut that part of your brain down for a while.

Studies have shown that exercise as simple as ten minutes of walking can release the anxiety you're storing in your body and give relief for hours after. Exercise also produces endorphins and improves the ability to sleep, both of which lower stress—creating an upward-trending cycle.

Short story: Under stress, your body *wants to move.*

Step 6

Ground yourself in the present moment

Earlier this year, I had just picked my kids up from school and was asking them about their day. My normally even-keeled middle child suddenly melted in front of me, saying, "Fourth grade is actually kind of stressful!"

I asked him what he does to work through his stress, and he said he tries to remember something his teacher has been telling the class.

"If you're stressed," he said, "it's probably because you're either thinking about something in the past or something in the future. And if you just forget about all that and think about *this* moment, then it doesn't feel so bad."

TRUTH from a 4th-grader!

Looking behind and trying to see ahead can give us stress, but the present moment? The rhythm of your steps, the sensation of a breeze floating through an open window, the scent of your child's skin right after a bath… The present moment allows that stress to slip away.

During times of stress, make an extra effort to ground yourself in the gift of the moment. Regularly tune in to your senses, listen to a guided meditation, focus on your breath, take a gratitude walk, etc. Whatever you decide to do, simply *be. here. now.*

Step 7

Watch your inner critic

As if anxiety weren't enough, we also often beat ourselves up for experiencing it!

Do any of these thoughts sound familiar?

- "Other people seem to be handling {quarantine, the headlines, grocery shortages, etc.} just fine. Why am *I* such a mess?"

- "I'm so worried and stressed out that I'm being a crappy {mom, partner, friend, etc.}. Who *does* that?!"

- "Why can't I just chill out?!"

- "I'm so unmotivated."

The last thing you need is to judge and demean yourself for the anxiety you're experiencing. So try asking yourself this question:

Do these judgments of yourself make you feel *more* or *less* anxious?

For almost all of us, the answer is more.

The next time you notice a self-critical thought, interrupt it and remind yourself that you're doing the BEST you can in this moment and *it is enough*. Compassion toward yourself will take you so much farther in relieving your anxiety than self-criticism ever could.

3 Bonus Tips

Create outer order—for inner calm

In a nine-year study of how thirty-two families interacted with their belongings, UCLA researchers found a correlation between high cortisol levels (a.k.a. stress) and a high density of household objects. In short, too much *stuff* causes us unnecessary stress.

Even without a scientific study to back it up, I think we all know the relief that order can bring, so look for small spaces and small windows of time where you can infuse a bit more order—and a bit more CALM—into your home life.

Schedule time to worry

It's almost impossible—especially during times like these—to avoid worrying altogether. So what if you gave your brain a designated time for it? Doing this can bring relief during the rest of the day, because every time you find your brain starting down a familiar negative spiral, you can tell it, "We'll think about this at 5:00 while we make dinner." (Or whatever time you choose.)

Tip! If you tell your brain you'll worry about it on your next walk, you'll find it hard to really worry, since moving the body slows an overactive amygdala, as we talked about in Step 5. (Double win!)

More on this in Episode 56 of the podcast "Happier with Gretchen Rubin"

Practice intentional self-care

While some of your go-to self-care options may be unavailable to you right now (getting a massage, spending time on your own in a coffee shop, etc.), there are still a hundred practices you can do at home—and they've almost never been this essential. A few thoughts to encourage your self-care:

- Caring for yourself isn't selfish; it allows you to use your overflow to love and serve others.

- Self-care isn't about duration; it's about frequency. You don't necessarily need a half-day spa-treatment or a weekend away. What you need are small, consistent acts threaded throughout the days and weeks that make up this season.

- Self-care isn't just a list of things to do; it's the way you THINK. It means being gentle with yourself, guarding your thoughts with care, learning to live with authenticity, and holding your self-worth above everything else.